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URBAN VOIDS AS A RESOURCE FOR THE DESIGN OF CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPACES

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Urban Voids as a Resource for the Design of Contemporary Public Spaces

1. Urban voids as a problem and resource for cities

At the beginning of this new century, cities appear to have changed significantly. New cities have taken shape, in which the specific characteristics of urban landscapes have been progressively redefined. In particular, the spatial codes that produced a familiar, recognizable urban landscape over the centuries (Consonni, 2008 and 2013) — mainly defined through a recurring, measured relationship between the built environment and empty spaces — have changed. At the basis of this profound change there lies, in particular, the drastic redefinition of the relationship between used and unused spaces in urban contexts in which the presence of emptiness becomes pervasive and characterizes broad areas (Secchi, 1984).

In synthesis, although with some risk of oversimplification and referring particularly to the situation in Italy, there seem to be two main causes that at different times and for different reasons have given rise to the formation of innumerable empty spaces in contemporary settlements.

On the one hand, starting in the early 1980s, the processes of city growth, which was intense and not adequately governed, gave rise to non-continuous urbanization, producing innumerable residual spaces in the most recent settlements. In the last fifty years, there has been an unprecedented rate of growth in urbanized territories in Europe and Italy (Indovina, Fregolent, Savino, 2005). Due to its quantity (uncommon) and quality (not very compact in the urban form that it has created in different contexts), this urbanization process was perhaps, up to the early 2000s before the global financial crisis, the main cause of empty spaces.

On the other hand, and not entirely synchronously with what occurred in the first respect, is the spread of decommissioning of many production and service activities and the resulting abandonment of structures that represented a material and indelible mark on the territory of an important period of economic growth for the country.¹ This produced a “perforation” of the existing urban fabric from within, leaving “wrecks” in many parts of Italian cities of what were once important manufacturing and service structures now emptied of their original function (Ciorra and Marini, 2012).

The result of the paradoxically synergic interaction of these different processes — haphazard growth, oversizing of urban contexts, and the abandonment of some historical areas — is evinced today by spatial discontinuity and functional disconnection among the parts of a vast urbanized territory that with some hesitation we

¹ Reference is made first to the situation in Italy, but the phenomenon — albeit with timeframes and means that differ slightly from country to country — affects all of Europe.

call *city* (Di Giovanni, 2010). Furthermore, in some cases the consequences are more serious and regard the formation of situations that are potentially dangerous for public health and safety as a result of degradation and/or pollution and environmental weakening of various sites.

However, empty space often, at least potentially, constitutes an important resource for cities, which, with some work, could be made possible by: redefining the urban welfare apparatus; producing innovation and environmental sustainability; regenerating individual spaces, with reverberating positive effects in nearby contexts; and reconnecting previously interrupted settlement tracts.

The working conditions, however, are not easy. Both the spread and organization of current processes of obsolescence and abandonment and the contraction of internal resources available for territorial interventions (lacking investments by subjects and external capital) define the essential, unavoidable terms of a fundamental aporia. This is rather relevant in light of the possibility to create systematic, coordinated interventions to recover and change the use of innumerable existing empty urban spaces and those that will likely be formed in the near future. If the presence of empty spaces in urban fabrics generally preserves a peculiar centrality, the possibilities for intervening on it seem to be capable of being expressed only under some conditions.

2. From strategic to tactical: orientation towards what is possible and useful, here and now

There is growing awareness about the fundamental need to define means, orientations, timeframes, and priorities for the interventions on empty urban areas according to a strongly contextual, contingent evaluation system, occasionally considering the opportunities and limits of some possible actions.

The claim could basically be made that once the operational push based on the presence of available capital has been exhausted and the presence of urban voids in the territory has spread, the conditions for a “strategic” approach to planning interventions for the recovery and change of use of empty urban spaces become less adequate. The “definition of the place” and “power of capital” are missing; these aspects are precisely part of any strategic approach (De Certeau, 1990).

Scenarios and means of intervention have changed profoundly with respect to the past. These are based especially on the possibility of seizing opportunities that arise in relation to some contextual and especially contingent circumstances that are often closely connected to the activation of local subjects, or to the availability of cognitive and political resources, or in the interest of someone at a particular moment. In other words, the conditions for interventions on open spaces and buildings are created and oriented in a mainly “tactical” sense, outside of any synoptic drawings that are instead typically part of a strategic approach.

There is a recognized need to implement a tactical approach towards projects for empty urban spaces that can operate intelligently, starting from the recognition of some contextual and contingent opportunities and organizing the consequent activities. In this perspective, it is necessary to precisely identify the resources (often scarce and not immediately available), their possible uses, activation times, and subjects that can be involved or those potentially interested in defining some possible interventions.

It is then particularly important to distinguish between the types of empty spaces, specific conditions in which they are found, the state of the property and the different classes of use, the possibility of reactivating and reusing them, the means of intervention, relative timeframes, and particular limits. It is therefore essential to define the framework of possibilities and priorities for intervention in a way that is

not abstract, but rather referring to the change (which is often difficult to forecast) in events and the evolution of the conditions in relation to which different types of operation can be implemented concretely.

This is a necessary assessment to define the conditions with respect to which contemporary empty urban spaces in different cases can be considered a resource and material for urban design solutions. In many instances it is a resource essential for reactivating sets of relationships between city spaces and segments of urban society at risk of isolation and a reduction of their role. In particular, it is a resource for the production of available spaces to welcome new, relevant expressions and forms of public life at the juncture of the current phase of the city.

3. For a different consideration of urban voids

In relation to the contingent and contextual character of these interventions, it is necessary to acquire a different (greater and more precise) awareness of the nature and sense of the empty space, of its need and reason for existing in contemporary urban situations.

The origin of the events leading to the formation of empty urban spaces can in many cases be recognized in processes of loss or reduction of the value (i.e., the sense and use) of some parts of the city. In this perspective, the loss of meaning represents the main condition giving rise to the formation of wasted spaces, the formation of urban objects lacking semantic, aesthetic, or useful value.

Empty spaces, assumed to be areas where not only matter but also human activities and social or individual meaning are rarefied, can be interpreted as available space to welcome activities of exchange and social interaction among individuals. Therefore, empty spaces, as areas that firstly have in themselves the capacity to favor interaction and sociability and to welcome different forms of interaction and public life, can appropriately be assumed as a material element for the reproduction of the public sphere (Habermas, 2008) and for the cultural development and innovation of urban practices.

Empty spaces, where they form, tend to define a different spatial and social statute of the city. They are frequently “areas suspended” from flows of ordinary social practices and “dissonant elements” in the ordered urban landscapes of the contemporary city. Following Michel Foucault (2001), one might say that they are “other spaces,” “heterotopias,” that is, cultural facts and critical elements in the ordinary realm. In fact, according to Foucault, heterotopias, “in any culture as in every civilization [are] real places, effective places, places that appear delineated in the institution of society itself, and that constitute a sort of counter-place, a type of utopia effectively realized in which real places — all the other real places that are found within the culture — are represented, contested, subverted contemporaneously; a sort of place that is found outside of any other place, for as much as they can effectively be localized. These places ... are absolutely different from all the places that they reflect and of which are spoken” (Foucault, 2001: 23-24)². They are places of suspension and freedom from common reality and from the stereotypes that society and individuals project on it.

In this sense, following Foucault, it is true that heterotopias (and therefore all those empty spaces and abandoned urban spaces) have a limited consistency as concrete places because they are not the object of direct perception or of particular attention in itself. They constitute the vehicle (however essential) through which anything surrounding them is recalled, playing a fundamental role in building relationships of meaning (even before physical and functional relationships), which is particularly necessary in today’s fragmented and discontinuous urban territories.

2 Author’s translation.

They are spaces that interconnect and form relationships between other urban spaces, subjects, and situations. They typically arise out of a place for exchange and interaction and in this sense approximate the function of the formal public space itself. In some cases, they represent the prelude to or anticipation towards the weight of relationship and meaning that social practices manage to spontaneously express.

4. Forms, origins, and evolutions

The many forms of empty spaces in cities

What, therefore, are the forms and conditions of empty space in different urban contexts? What type of spaces can be included in the conceptual and operational structures delineated above?

While a taxonomy is impossible due to the variety of situations and specific conditions, some recurring types include: residual spaces (in many cases swatches of land enclosed by road interchanges or railway junctions) or abandoned spaces near infrastructure (generally bands of various widths along different types of roads, urban spaces under bridges and viaducts) or bodies of water (mostly along waterways and natural and/or artificial basins around inhabited centers); residual open spaces in the urban fringes where modern agriculture is no longer possible due to their reduced size or narrow, irregular form; wild and abandoned open spaces that separate accidentally neighboring or conterminous settlements; unbuilt plots (not never built) in low-density urban fabrics; technical spaces — some of which are very large (merchandise yards and general areas for stocking merchandise, obsolete technological equipment) — to which access is generally limited while parts often exist that are no longer or not strictly tied to the current type of activity; inactive quarries and uncontrolled dumps; free areas (large areas for military, logistical, or city service activities) and/or different types of buildings (sometimes even historical and prestigious buildings) abandoned following the cessation of activities that were once performed there; inactive industrial sites; and areas targeted for demolition that persist among compact urban fabrics.³

Origins and causes of the formation of empty spaces

The formation of empty spaces represents the consequence of moments of crisis, that is, social, cultural, or economic changes (in the means of production and consumption). The effects of these phase changes are manifested primarily in the evolution of activities and the forms of use — or underuse or nonuse — of urban spaces inherited from preceding eras.

The spatial types described above mostly result from processes of functional withdrawal, abandonment, and individual and/or collective negligence, errors or inconsistencies in settlement and infrastructure designs, waste and oversizing of the various urban services, and emergency interventions made without the necessary recovery operations. All of these phenomena determine a general emptying of meaning, activities, and matter and give rise to the progressive formation of empty, wasted, and residual urban spaces (Berger, 2006; Gasparrini and Terracciano, 2016). The main causes that have given rise to the formation of empty spaces encom-

3 With an operational attitude, it is particularly important to evaluate the specific conditions at each site. The starting point determines different attitudes and resistance to the transformations or reuse. Because of this, it is occasionally necessary to make an in-depth assessment of the conditions and limits of each intervention.

pass all forms of *destruction* — wars⁴, earthquakes⁵, or various types of catastrophic events, but also spontaneous collapse following structural deterioration (Lynch, 1992) — that mark the lifecycle of human settlements.

However, empty spaces have often originated in *abandonment* that has historically regarded manufacturing spaces and equipment in particular. While the contraction of industrial activities in Italy and Europe from the 1970s through the 1990s gave rise to innumerable repeated episodes of decommissioning production areas and equipment, the overall change in economic trends in recent years has generated urban degrowth and settlement contraction. The consequences of this are now known (Coppola, 2012; Zanfi, 2010), as is evinced by the empty spaces left like scars on the territory.

Nor are various forms of *forgetfulness and distraction* infrequent. These are often manifest in different types of areas and buildings from different eras that have progressively lost their usefulness or to which contemporary society no longer attributes value and meaning. This is the case with some typical welfare structures from the 1900s (nursing homes, hospitals and care centers, pools or sports facilities that no longer comply with modern standards, etc.), as well as some residual natural areas whose value and possible roles we struggle to identify (riparian areas along waterways, open spaces enclosed in the urban fabric, exhausted quarries, grounds of decommissioned infrastructure, etc.).

Sometimes, and not infrequently, it is *infrastructure-completion interventions* that produce swatches of spaces and portions of territory within which it winds up being difficult to insert and construct buildings and activities. In these cases, the empty space is what is made inaccessible by infrastructure (a condition that sometimes favors the reproduction of local isolated, autonomous micro-ecosystems) and/or by places that exist between the infrastructure and settlements that were already present in the area or (as often occurs) were located later precisely near the infrastructure itself. In some cases, instead, *discontinuous urbanization* operations reproduce over time independent settlements among which the empty space assumes the character of residual and/or incomplete space.

In contrast, empty space may be deliberately interposed where direct contact or co-existence among irregular settlements is made difficult or impossible by functional means or principles of spatial ordering. In these cases, reciprocal interference is avoided by *putting distance between elements* as a first, approximate form of protection in an attempt to defuse potential conflicts among existing activities.⁶

4 The experience of recovering empty spaces (produced by bombardments in the Second World War) made by Aldo van Eyck in Amsterdam between 1947 and 1978 is well known. See Gaetano Ginex (2002), *Aldo van Eyck. L'enigma della forma*, Testo & Immagine, Torino; Liane Lefaivre, Alexander Tzonis (1999), *Aldo van Eyck Humanist Rebel. Inbetweening in a Postwar World*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam; Aldo van Eyck (2008), *Writings*, eds. Ligtelijn V. Strauven F., 2 vol., SUN Publisher, Amsterdam; Liane Lefaivre, Ingeborg de Roode (2002) eds., *Aldo van Eyck. The playgrounds and the city*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam; Vincent Ligtelijn (1999) ed., *Aldo van Eyck. Works*, Birkhauser, Basel. A technical reading of this experience can be found in Andrea Di Giovanni (2010), op. cit., Ch. 15.

5 In these cases, and with particularly serious earthquakes such as the one in L'Aquila on 6 April 2009 and again in many areas of central Italy on 24 August and 30 October 2016, the times and means of reconstruction are difficult to estimate. What is transitory sometimes tends to assume an aspect of perpetuity and the face of the city undergoes modifications that persist even for a long time.

6 This is the choice frequently made when new commercial megastructures or manufacturing or logistical platforms are located near existing settlements. In many cases, this distancing produces swatches of territory that rapidly become scraps subject to abandonment and degradation.

Processes of reappropriation and meaning as a project foundation

Many of these spaces are presented today as vacant lands emptied of matter, deprived of a specific role, and expelled from the circuit of attention and social values. If observed up close, however, these spaces reveal themselves to be full of practices. The activities performed express new vocations and possible meanings, emerging social trends and collective wishes that look for opportunities for satisfaction among the folds of traditional, well-known urban spaces. The urban spaces where these practices fit in are often forgotten by many, but not by everyone. They are “loose spaces” (Franck and Stevens, 2007), places chosen to carry out the unusual practice of informal sociality or for sports, recreational, or expressive activities that do not fit in elsewhere.

They are wasted spaces, but at the same time precious places reserved for social development: empty urban spaces in which free, creative use can incrementally produce social innovation and functional recovery in circumstances and at a time in which other types of more traditional, organized resources are not very available or easy to mobilize.⁷ Within spontaneous forms of self-organization and self-production, abandoned areas under bridges become playing fields equipped with uncommon resources, or open spaces created by the demolition of crumbling buildings become temporary water parks or minimal playgrounds, or open interiors are even made available for the most diverse forms of social interaction or to hold local festivals.⁸ Urban-planning projects can learn a lot from social practices that spontaneously affect and redefine the meanings and uses of empty spaces: understanding the desires of urban populations, recognizing new forms of social interaction, and reinterpreting possible pertinent uses for neglected and abandoned urban spaces. In other words, social practices can foster an “intelligent” use of design tools and solutions that can interpret the starting conditions, social demands, and available resources with creativity and originality.

5. Perspectives and orientations

With increasing frequency in these conditions, landscape interventions and tactical urbanism create strongly contextual solutions defined from time to time — in the best cases — with respect to the needs and means of local living. “Typological hybrids” are invented to consider different needs: squares that also serve as car parks or gardens; green areas with wide areas of paved surfaces to hold a wide range of activities; cemetery enclosures designed and used as gardens; parking spaces that can be converted into playgrounds; streets that integrate green spaces. In general, these experiences are interesting for the attempts made to innovate with the urban space (Aa. Vv., 2005 and 2006).

⁷ In fact, the current restructuring of institutions, social- and party-representation organisms, forms of economy, and local traditional societies (subject to constant ethnic and cultural mixing) makes the complex system traditionally delegated to dealing with social questions slower and more difficult to activate in a timely manner.

⁸ These and other activities were documented among the pilot interventions listed in the four issues of the “In Common” series (2005–2006) of the Spanish magazine *A+t*.

One initial basic criterion for intervening on the empty space regards the construction of a system of meanings, values, and possible roles defined with the contribution of a vast section of local society, or, when this is not possible, enhancing spontaneous activation of some urban populations that have shown interest in considering, adapting, and using some of these derelict urban spaces. This is a fundamental aspect that regards *sensemaking* and the need to assign a role to the urban space in all its parts.

This is the objective pursued by the Municipality of Copenhagen and the Reldania Foundation⁹ in Nørrebro, a peripheral district in Copenhagen. The goal is to promote the recovery of a 33,000-m² residual band of abandoned land in this part of the city, which is situated between some neighborhoods characterized by a strong, conflicting, multiethnic presence. Superkilen was designed by a team of architects (BIG), landscape designers (Topotek 1), and visual artists (Superflex). The scope is for social integration among the various ethnicities present in the neighborhoods, avoiding any form of cultural assimilation. This new complex public space (composed of a sports area, market, and green area for children to play) will also contain a multitude of symbolic objects from the homelands of the numerous ethnic communities present in a neighborhood that has historically been problematic for the Danish capital. The result is an operation of “semantic densification” of the space, aspiring to create a new urban centrality and reinforcing the space’s role as a cornerstone of the local urban structure.

Copenhagen, Superkilen (2011-2012). BIG (architects); Topotek 1 (landscape designers); Superflex (visual artists). Photography Iwan Baan (source: aristipavlou.wordpress.com/2015/10/26/project-of-the-week_vol-iv/)



⁹ This foundation works to improve the urban environment through architectural interventions.



Repairing spaces and existing and abandoned urban services; *reusing* structures and urban spaces that are underused and deteriorated for different scopes and other activities; *recycling* buildings or parts of them to form new urban equipment: these are three design attitudes that are being used with increasing frequency to deal with scraps, waste, and abandoned spaces in contemporary urban landscapes (Ciorra and Marini, 2012). The reduction of available economic resources and the limits imposed in recent years by local budgets suggest a cautious, parsimonious attitude and stimulate creative intelligence in reusing existing material resources and those inherited from the past.

This type of intervention, however, is often provisional and refers to a definite, generally short period of time. These aspects reveal the tentative character of many experiences that intelligently and realistically assume the impossibility of intervening

on the physical space and its functions in a certain, long-lasting manner.

This seems to be an appropriate orientation for work that is necessary and possible in this phase. However, to be free of strict contingency and eventuality (and to aspire to greater legitimacy and social utility), the interventions to reuse and recycle existing areas and urban equipment should perhaps in the future be shown to be more aware of the characteristics of available materials and more sensitive to the specifics of different contexts and the propensities of local populations.¹⁰

Along these lines, a meaningful and successful example is the program to recover empty urban spaces, “Esto no es un solar” [This is not a lot] created (first phase in 2010) by the Zaragoza city administration through the initiative and under the operational and technical direction of the Grávalos-Di Monte architectural firm. Several dozen empty urban spaces have been transformed into public spaces through minimal interventions to secure repair and arrange the areas, using specialized, temporarily unemployed workers and involving local populations in the choice of how to organize the spaces.

Zaragoza, Esto no es un solar (2009-2010). Grávalos Di Monte Arquitectos (source: gravalos-dimonte.wordpress.com)



¹⁰ Some recent research highlights the difficulties tied to reusing abandoned structures and the “repair” of settlements. With regard to these two aspects, see, respectively, Christensen (2008) and Tachieva (2010).





Another aspect regards the reproduction of local systems of *material welfare*. The implementation of new policies to regenerate urban welfare services and the production of new equipment that is better adapted to the means of contemporary living should consider various aspects. Examples include the temporariness of uses and needs in relation to various phases in the lifecycle of people, forms of mobility, and territorial subsidiarity; the multiplicity and variety of individual and collective practices and the consequent array of demands that urban populations refer to the different subjects of territorial governance; the multiple belonging of individuals to urban populations in relation to the forms of organization of services.¹¹

These aspects (only mentioned here) define the main lines of a manner of city living that is substantially different from the past. There is not only a demand for collective spaces and equipment characterized by flexibility and a multi-purpose nature of functional devices and urban spaces, but also by an adaptability of services due to the change in uses and dilation of the geography of different practices.

¹¹ Basic arguments for and perspectives of intervention are addressed in Pasqui (2008) and Pomilio (2009), respectively.

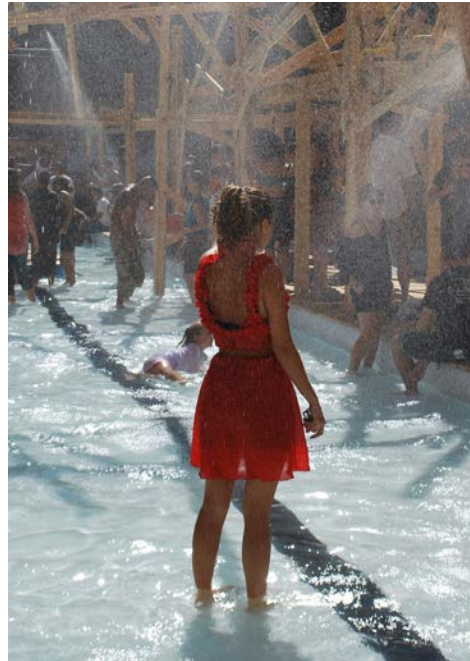
Exactitude in choosing the established provisions and their localization, *lightness* of interventions and their reversibility in time (even a short time), and a *multiplicity* of practices and admitted populations¹² are recognizable characteristics in many recent interventions that try to provide a new range (sometimes even informal) of community services and equipment.

This is the case, for example, of the long experience that began in 2010 by a local association to reactivate the social functions that have always existed in the area of El Campo de la Cebada in Madrid in the historical La Latina neighborhood.

Madrid, El Campo de Cebada (2010-2017). Asociacion El Campo del Cebada; Basurama; EXYZT; Zuloark (source: facebook.com/campodecebada and elcampodecebada.org)



¹² Albeit with meanings in different parts, these are the terms also used by Paolo Colarossi cit. in Patrizia Gabellini (2001), *Tecniche urbanistiche*, Carocci, Rome, p. 267.



Particular attention is placed on issues related to the *environment*: its conservation, maintenance, and active regeneration. These are crucial aspects that range from reducing land consumption to preserving natural habitats, from the respectful use of natural reserves in contemporary urban landscapes to reclaiming polluted sites. The many different questions pertaining to the sustainability of processes and the resilience of interventions that can be activated have now encountered widespread social sensitivity and technical attention, which are documented by ample literature on the topic.¹³

In cases where the intervention on empty spaces in the city and territory deals with environmental issues, the different forms of recovering and regenerating the soil and habitats are explored, identifying possible uses of the different spaces that are compatible with the characteristics of the sites and capable of reactivating their ecological function, which is often compromised. These are often basic interventions, but sophisticated with regard to characterizing the form and landscape and demanding with respect to recovery and reclamation operations that are necessary in many cases.

Examples of this orientation include the Gleisdreieck (Atelier Loidl) and Nordbahnhof (Fugmann Janota) parks recently created in the central area of Berlin on the site of decommissioned railway spaces following the infrastructure and settlement restructuring that was necessary after the reunification of the German capital. Likewise, in Antwerp, the recovery of decommissioned railway spaces allowed the Spoor Noord Park to be created (Secchi and Viganò). Under different conditions, the intervention to recover the former Vall d'en Joan dump by Batlle i Roig Arquitectes in the Garraf area near Barcelona also occurred.

Berlin, Park am Gleisdreieck Eastpark (2011), Westpark (2013), Flaschenbals (2014). Atelier Loidl (source: atelier-loidl.de)



¹³ Some of the most interesting recent contributions include issue 25/26 (2012) of *Piano Progetto Città* from the Dipartimento DART at the “Gabriele D’Annunzio” University of Chieti-Pescara dedicated to “Progetto ed ecologia” [Project and ecology] and Pileri and Granata (2012).



Barcelona, Landscape Restoration of Garraf Waste Landfill (2003, in progress). Batlle I Roig Arquitectes. Photography Jordi Surroca (source: batlleiroig.com)



2004



2005



2007



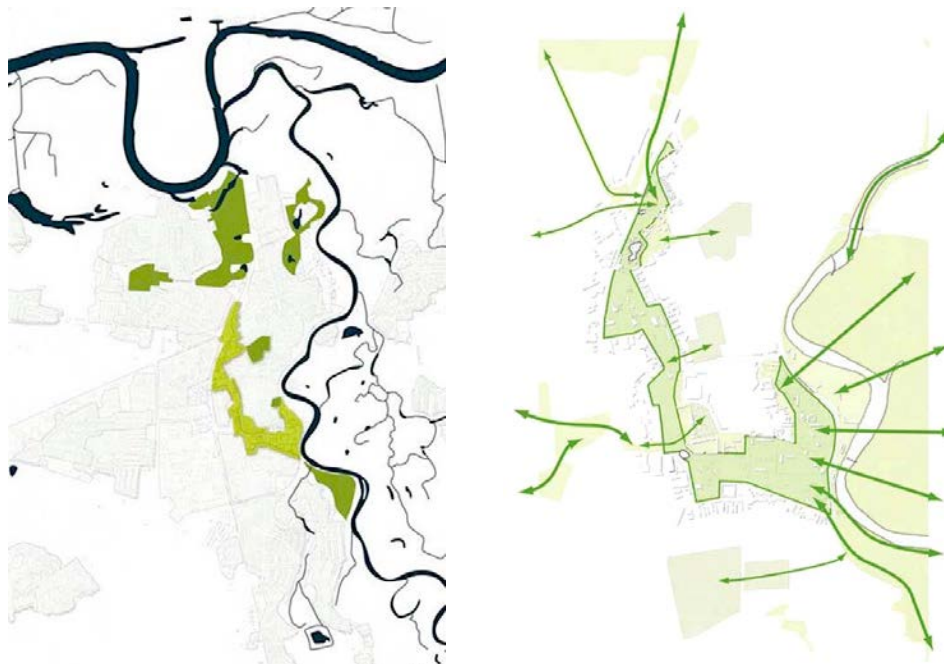
2009...

One last fundamental question regards the need to intervene on empty spaces to activate possible strategies for *settlement recomposition* within and among the various parts of the settlements. The disconnect between discontinuous settlements designed as monads and the paratactical, banal composition that characterizes the internal structure of each of them often constitute the main causes of incomplete urban landscape.

The presence of empty spaces in the interstices between conterminous settlements can represent an opportunity to break the isolation, building nexuses and opportunities for relationships among the different settlements, pursuing the primary objective of continuous urban space, thereby contrasting fragmentation and disconnection. On the other hand, the presence of empty spaces within a specific settlement can be interpreted as an opportunity to insert new pioneering functions capable of contrasting and compensating the mono-functional character and specialization of existing settlements. Once again, this relates to two possible lines of intervention that should be intelligently interpreted with respect to the conditions and trajectories of possible development in the different contexts, building differentiated strategies that cannot in any way be standardized.¹⁴

In these cases, interventions for mending may regard the recovery and transformation of open spaces of various sizes, sometimes even large ones. Such is the case of the Landscape Corridor in Dessau (about 17 ha) currently being realized (Station C23) in the interstitial space produced by the demolition of abandoned housing following the demographic retraction triggered in the 1990s by the German reunification. In other instances, reconstructing interrupted urban tracts may occur by recovering abandoned building structures and integrating the settlements and functions around them. This is the case of the project to reconvert the area around Westwood Station in Massachusetts (Elkus/Manfredi), which establishes the insertion of service activities in the recovered building of the railway station that serves as a relay between two existing settlements.

Dessau, Landscape Corridor (2010, in progress). Station C23 Architekten und Landschaftsarchitekten (source: stationc23.de and A+t)



¹⁴ With this goal, a rereading was made of the three compositional figures of the past (neighborhood unit, core, and in-between), which are still pertinent today. See Di Giovanni (2010).



6. Ductile spaces for urban innovations

The construction of new spaces and public services is therefore the horizon assumed by most interventions, but the attitude towards their design and awareness about their management and use by contemporary urban populations have changed. The formalism that characterized interventions in the last thirty–forty years has been abandoned and the new focus is on building urban environments that are sustainable from the environmental, social, and economic points of view.

Pushed by a general revisiting of lifestyles and ways of living, the question of the ‘human scale’ re-emerges (after years of latency). The human scale becomes one of the main arguments in the design of new urban spaces that is reoriented towards a measure closer to people’s effective needs.

The existence of empty space, its ductility (while with meaningful differences related to different contexts marked by various forms of compromise in sites and resistance to recovery) and its possibilities for transformation constitute an important opportunity for a project that is oriented in this sense.

Working on the empty space today can lead to a spatial and functional settlement reconfiguration aimed at articulating the spectrum of possible uses and social practices in view of the greater ability of urban spaces to gather the synesthesia of contemporary urban practices (Pasqui, 2008).

The pursuit of these objectives can perhaps, at least in part, constitute a concrete, realistic aim to improve the livability of contemporary cities.

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